



## The Student Experience of E-learning Laboratory (SEEL) Pathfinder Project Journey



### 1. In the beginning

Greenwich is a large modern university with 25,000 students studying a diverse set of subjects at all levels, both on campus and in partner institutions in the UK and overseas; we encourage a wide range of approaches to the use of e-learning. Some of the challenges we address through employing e-learning are evident in the large number of widening participation students, significant numbers of part-time learners, a diverse and multicultural student body, over three and a half thousand overseas students, support for learners in collaborative partnerships and in a multi-campus environment spanning two government regions.



The University of Greenwich is no stranger to e-learning having pioneered Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) tools and techniques in support of a range of courses in the mid/late 1990's and validated its first wholly on-line MSc. programme for health professionals in 1996. It embraced the e-learning benchmarking exercise which was intended to, "*Evaluate ongoing relevance of the e-learning strategy to the work of the sector.*" (HEFCE, 2005) We saw it as an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of our particular e-learning strategy which, "*does not of itself assume that e-learning is a "good thing" but expects (it) to position itself through improving support to students to learn effectively, improve retention and the management of learning.*" (University of Greenwich, 2006)

The Student Experience of E-learning Laboratory (SEEL) grew out of the benchmarking exercise and is a three-year initiative that seeks to discover more about the student experience of using technology in support of learning. Notwithstanding the diverse nature of the student population in terms of age, we wish to narrow the perceived gap between the digital natives and immigrants (Prensky, 2001). Through a series of 'evaluation experiments' we want to ascertain to what extent our e-learning provision does enhance learning, aid retention and support our widening participation agenda with such a diverse student body. The primary aim of the first year of SEEL (funded through Pathfinder) was to establish a 'virtual laboratory' to examine, develop and implement a range of approaches and tools to evaluate the student experience of e-learning, make recommendations on curriculum renewal, and contribute towards the transformation of the learning and teaching agenda at Greenwich and the wider community.

### 2. The student experience?

An important finding of our benchmarking was that a wide cross-section of staff within the University believed that e-learning enhances the student experience. It was identified as a prime motivation for deployment in a number of Schools and a considerable resource had been expended in recent years in funding a range of innovative projects seeking to promote and operationalise this perspective. However, another of our benchmarking outcomes underlined the findings of Smith and Beetham (2005) confirming how little we actually know about the student experience of e-learning. Given that the highest priority objective of the Higher Education Funding Council's strategy for e-learning is, "*to enable institutions to meet the needs of learners and their own aspirations for development*" (HEFCE, 2005:5), systematic evaluation to determine if those needs and aspirations are being met is clearly needed. Furthermore, the OBHE/ACU Final Bench Marking Report (2007:7) revealed that, "*Evaluation data was relatively weak, and it was felt that significant improvements were required in many HEIs in getting better data from students on e-learning use in order to support and drive change and greater adoption.*"

The expected project outcomes for SEEL included:

- Enhanced understanding of the student experience of e-learning in terms of students (gender, ethnicity, age etc.), subjects, level and location
- Greater clarity of the actual and potential role played by e-learning (including e-services) at different stages of the student lifecycle
- Recommendations for pedagogical renewal
- Enhanced capacity of staff to evaluate the use and impact of e-learning
- Development of an enhanced network, primarily through activities based on CAMEL (<http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/camel>), with external partners to further develop and share effective practices
- Critical awareness of the way in which technology can contribute to the development of a distributed learning community
- A shared environment through the virtual laboratory for continued experimentation and development of effective practices in evaluating the student experience of e-learning
- A selection of mini case studies on the impact of e-learning and e-services on the student experience

### 3. Milestones on our journey

Our journey in the first year of the project has been eventful and full of anticipation as we began with a survey of current literature on the student experience, examined a range of evaluation tools, wrestled with our Management Information System (MIS) data, constructed our initial on-line survey and rose to fever pitch as we began to see the first responses from nearly 1000 students. We have produced a number of reports that will be available via our project web site, run a series of workshops for staff and made numerous presentations. Now we are plotting our next voyage of discovery which will be firmly routed in the results achieved to date. In further detail the outcomes of our SEEL project to date are outlined below.



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1. An analysis and overview of existing studies and the results of projects recently engaged in evaluating the student experience of e-learning will be made available initially as a report and then as a Wiki to inform on-going research into this topic by the wider community including members of the HEA funded ELESIG (<http://elesig.ning.com/>).
2. A report on e-services and potential links between the adoption of e-learning, progression and retention within the University with recommendations for action raised a series of issues and probably produced more questions than answers. Overall, however, it is considered useful in helping us to gain a better understanding of what data and reports are required of the system if we are to answer some fundamental questions including whether we get value for money. It has proved difficult to investigate and discover with any clarity what impact the introduction of technology into teaching, learning and support has been at Greenwich over the past few years using existing reports and mechanisms. Schools have undertaken a considerable amount of work in these areas but without explicit evaluation of e-learning in courses and cross-University reporting mechanisms much of it happens in isolation. Currently there are no specific ways of evaluating course-level uses of technology or measure impact with any certainty. This is due in part to difficulties encountered in separating the technological impact from other influences such as changes to courses or programmes or responses by Schools and Offices to the National Student Survey.

The introduction of the student portal in 2005 and the redesign of the web have occasioned improvements in both accessibility and content of information, guidance and welfare areas on the web and it is ease of access to such information and increased convenience that students appear to appreciate most. Although Greenwich was initially at the forefront of development of email counselling, very few students have chosen to use the service this way, preferring to see a counsellor in person. Alternatively, students who think they may be dyslexic can complete an online pre-screening form and many students prefer this option to making an appointment with a dyslexia tutor. Future actions are going to be predicated on

recommending a number of enhancements to internal reporting and data collection processes and longer term research into comparisons of student's progression on courses using/not using technology. It will also recommend a joint support services survey on what students want from the web.

3. A report on tools and approaches that may be used to evaluate the student experience of e-learning will be made available as a report initially and then a Wiki to enable further tools and experiences of their use by the wider community to be recorded. Two key messages from the study are that students have the ability to make judgements as to whether technology is being used effectively and appropriately (echoed in the literature review and by our own survey data) and that we need to recognise that they are the 'experts' on the student experience. Other key messages include ...

Factors that have been identified in the literature as impacting on students' experience of e-learning not unsurprisingly show considerable overlap with areas identified as contributing positive student experiences in face-to-face contexts.

*"Evaluations should be at the course as opposed to the programme level and Student experiences of the whole may be less than the sum of the parts"*

(Prosser, 2008:2)

A major consequence of this lack of evaluation on the impact of the student experience is that no institution was able to cite conclusively that student learning is enhanced by its e-activities, although this is widely believed and student satisfaction is generally felt to be positive.

4. Base line data from the University wide survey of nearly 1000 students revealed a diverse set of experiences of the uses and perceptions of the role and value of technology in support of learning. The questionnaire was administered online, so the sample is fundamentally self-selecting and may well have particular characteristics related to the willingness to answer an online survey – at the very least this assumes a reasonable degree of familiarity and ease with ICT. Equally, a substantial number of the students (approximately 55%) come from one campus and of these almost a quarter come from the Business School. This is a reminder that such investigation needs to take into account the possibility that students may be experiencing a particular sort of pedagogical environments (in the case of the Business school, an expectation that all students use the corporate VLE, WebCT), and that 'experience' is always at least in some measure implicated in its environment – although always in a very complex way.

Respondents used technology a lot or moderately for "gathering information" (96.1%), "writing my assignments" (95.8%), "communicating with my family/friends" (92%), "viewing my course material" (91.8%) and "reading my course material" (89%).

Overall, students used e-mail for almost every form of communication within a learning context and there was some indication of a clear separation of technologies used for learning and communicating with teachers and the institution from those used for socialising, contacting family and friends and reluctance amongst some students to use these within formal learning contexts. However, students who advocated tutor use of MSN and Facebook commented that it would be more convenient for them, and enable "regular feedback" and that "it's easier to get to know (tutors) on social sites". The use of the portal for accessing University services is widespread and students are generally very positive.



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Students appear to make appropriate and informed choices regarding technology / software (natives) and expect tutors (immigrants) to do the same. They become frustrated

when tutors do not take advantage of basic technology/software. Over 50% of students strongly agree that 'e-learning is an important element of my course', and slightly over 50% agree or strongly agree that without e-learning they would be unable to study. Interestingly, that leaves 25% who disagree or strongly disagree and 24.3% who are neutral and do neither. Over two-thirds say that it makes their course more enjoyable, over half say that they interact with other students more as a result and 75.9% indicate that e-learning makes studying easier for them. Students saw peer support in the use of technology for study (74.9%) as slightly more useful than tutor support (71.8%). The substantial significance of Google and to a lesser extent Wikipedia in student learning emerges very clearly, with 72.8% using it to gather information and 45.4% using Wikipedia for the same purpose. Some caution should be exercised in interpreting this finding, though, since it does not, *in and of itself*, tell us that students are unable to use sources in a sophisticated way.

5. A series of 90 cameos of students illustrating: a range of learning contexts, learner characteristics, diverse uses of technology, perceptions of the value of technology in support of learning. These cameos were derived from individual student responses to the survey through the simple expedient of turning these responses into a neutral narrative. From this emerged relatively clear portrayals of individual uses and experiences of using technology for learning and in other aspects of their lives. If there is any single set of findings that summarises these cameos, it is that, even allowing for the fact that they may have shared experience of using an institutional VLE, students essentially construct an individual configuration of tools and uses that suit them (including whether they bother with the institution's email system); they expect such tools to work seamlessly and efficiently (in the way they would any consumer product) yet they are quite diverse when it comes to their level of satisfaction with what is provided. Responses here varied from a student who said that e-learning seemed "pretty efficient" at present, to others who, for instance, complained that the software they were forced to use looked as if it had been designed by a ten-year old or that the University's portal, "*is ugly and feels cheap, a better design would make it so much nicer*". These two comments (and others) provide a clear indication that, in its provision of online learning support, the University is competing with the commercial sector for ease of use, attractiveness and fitness for purpose of its 'products'.

Follow-up in-depth interviews have been held with a small number of respondents selected from the cameos and these will be published as case studies, representative of the student experience of using technology in support of learning at the University of Greenwich.

6. The project team was purposefully drawn from across a number of University Schools and Offices with the intention of enhancing the capacity of staff to work in a multi-disciplinary context that included academics, Office of Student Affairs (OSA) and Information and Library Services (ILS) staff. The organisation of the project into a series of work packages with leaders of each constituting the management team who met monthly was beneficial in facilitating shared ownership and is a model that may be applied successfully elsewhere in the University for developmental project management. A small group of colleagues who were also studying for their EdD. worked across the packages as 'labstaff' and provided some of the glue required to maintain a sense of continuity and progression throughout the first year of operation.
7. The SEEL initiative has increased awareness amongst colleagues from across the University, who have engaged in one or more of the four dissemination workshops, of the importance of acknowledging the student experience when considering the potential role of technology in enhancing learning. The final workshop produced an initial set of recommendations for consideration by managers, Directors of Learning and Quality and practitioners on making better use of technology to enhance learning and will be built upon as part of the project's sustainability agenda, contributing to the transformation of practice that is so much a part of Pathfinder.



8. Various members of the project team have gained a better understanding and enhanced awareness of some common sectoral issues in using technology to enhance learning and teaching by collaborating with other HEIs, primarily through the CAMEL cluster (Bradford, Brighton, TVU) with which we were associated. Meetings have been characterised by an open and honest exchange of views, sharing of expertise and discussion of common problems that has been as beneficial as the University's first encounter with the CAMEL model in 2005/6.

### 3. Sustainability: where are we going?

We view Pathfinder as the first year of a three-year curriculum renewal<sup>1</sup> initiative involving a number of key actions intended to transform learning and teaching and enhance the student experience. This is evidenced in part by the University's engagement with the HEA Change Academy (2006) in which, *"The overall vision for the project is that of producing a sea change in the culture of the organisation, such that students and staff would benefit from a climate and a support framework ... to enhance learning for the benefit of all. The overall aim would be to build the University's capacity for quality enhancement, which would see effects across all aspects of the institution's provision."*

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/change\\_academy\\_university\\_of\\_greenwich\\_2006](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/detail/change_academy_university_of_greenwich_2006)).

Initial recommendations of the final dissemination workshop include but were not confined to:

- Provide a technological environment that works seamlessly and offers a highly flexible means of configuration of learning by the (teacher and student) users.
- Consider the provision of a closed community tool to develop social networks (the example given was Ning) and investigate possibilities of induction using these networks. As part of this activity, identify students' prior knowledge of using technology that draws upon experience of school and industry.
- Provide further staff development in both pedagogy and selection and use of technology, drawing on examples of effective practices from the University and wider community that are then shared through the University's Learning Enhancement Site ([LENS](#)). An example might include examining alternatives to the use of e-mail as a major means of supporting the range of learning and teaching activities reported in the SEEL survey.
- Consider the appointment of e-coordinators for each School / Office to mediate the technology with academics and lastly but by no means least,
- Continue to listen to our 'customers', the acknowledged experts in the student experience, the learners themselves.

Review of the institutional e-learning strategy during 2008 will draw upon the results of year one of the SEEL project and the soon to be published revised HEFCE strategy. Having gained a better understanding of the student experience of e-learning, there are proposals to undertake a number of activities in the second year of the project including focused benchmarking of the use of technology in support of formative and summative assessment in every School. Some TQEF resources have already been allocated to this work and bids will be made for additional funds to enable SEEL to continue its journey into other uncharted waters.

### 4. Messages for the sector

Through SEEL and in line with HEFCE's (2005) e-learning strategy, we aim to, *"embed e-learning appropriately, using technology to transform higher education into a more student-focused and flexible system ..."* and to enable Greenwich, *"to meet the needs of learners and their own aspirations for development."* In terms of applying HEFCE's 'Measures for success' we aim to ensure that, *"ICT is commonly accepted into all aspects of the student experience ..., with innovation for enhancement and flexible learning, connecting areas of HE with other aspects of life and work."* Furthermore, we anticipate that the results from the first year of SEEL will help to inform our further development of, *"appropriate infrastructure and resources support for integrating registration and learning functions (and) have links with regional networks of institutions to support progression and community involvement."*

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to a review of pedagogical models, methods and approaches rather than content

Given the significance that seems to emerge for the use of Google and Wikipedia (alongside use of the University Portal) and the associated anxieties of academics about a passive and uncritical approach to learning, with information gathering at its heart, it might be worth exploring the extent to which the use of e-learning, and in particular the Internet, is leading to a shift away from the 'in-depth learning' that pedagogies have been seeking to encourage for many years.

Overall, students appear predominantly positive about the value of e-learning, but anxieties are also expressed about the potential for e-learning to replace face-to-face teaching and an indication either of the value of the personal and face-to-face or an expressed preference for it. Students who were positive about their experiences of e-learning indicated that they had received appropriate introductions and felt supported by academic and library staff, indicating the importance of sound inductions into the use of institutional systems and technologies.

Even where staff are considered 'smart' in their use of technology, our students are generally smarter and have high expectations of their tutors, peers and the institution. This view is supported by earlier studies and if other HEIs were to conduct a student experience survey, they might well find a similar picture emerging. A question for the sector, and perhaps also for HEFCE through its funding of JISC and HEA e-learning programmes, is whether despite our best endeavours is it likely that staff (still primarily immigrants) will ever be as smart as their students (increasingly natives) when it comes to employing technology? A fundamental difference in perception seems to exist between our students who do not see technology as a separate entity but as an integral part of everyday life and institutions (perhaps even the most e-mature) who may still be struggling with the concept and tend to see it as something separate from normal business processes, particularly with regard to learning and teaching. This is characterised in part perhaps by the number of institutions whose e-learning strategy sits outside of their learning and teaching strategy. Embedding it within a single policy document is often considered a sign of e-maturity but a majority of academics may still perceive it as not mainstream, not something they do (unless persuaded otherwise) and maybe even peripheral or irrelevant to the main business of research and teaching.

Actions that may add weight to the student voice, recognise their 'expert' status and begin to address some of the issues outlined above include:

- adapting strategies within the institution to move students from the levels of information gathering and communication to a far greater level of creativity
- doing more to understand the communication methods of learners and finding ways to exploit this in teaching and learning
- working with and developing academics to help combat the digital divide
- developing a more sophisticated understanding of how technology can be used to meet the needs of all students including the 'hard to reach' students
- employing teaching and learning strategies that capitalise on and use the skills of students, especially in the choice of software, evaluation and design of teaching and learning materials
- elevating assignment and feedback strategies through better constructive alignment and the adoption of more appropriate technologies
- exploring and building new channels of communication with students that can be exploited in many different contexts

Pathfinder has facilitated a series of exciting journeys across the sector into the unknown. We are grateful for the funding that has allowed us to gain a better understanding of the student experience of e-learning which will help in plotting our course as we venture into the second year of SEEL.

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